10; Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

THE KARENS OF BURMA

I

BACKGROUND

101 175 THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

181 131 361 563 186 They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

173 171 Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

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615 bathe in the *longyi* then draw a dry one over the wet one which they drop down underneath, thus making the change publicly but modestly without exposing the person. The wet garment is then soused in water and the laundry work is done.

VIII

INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

181 156 771 152 The Karens, as was said of the people of Borneo, "are not inferior but different". In their primitive state they were subject to the slavery of fear which had retarded their development. To them as to most primitive races all that is unknown is to be feared. They peopled, with all kinds of malevolent demons, the hills, the streams and the big trees, especially the banyan which is held in awe throughout the Orient probably because of its great fertility and tenacious hold on life. They were surrounded by fierce wild animals and more numerous and powerful neighbours. One of their own number aptly described his race as one that "is capable of being afraid".

This timidity has often militated against them. Because of fear they dare not speak their mind. They resort to the common "don't know" and thus hope to escape attention. They are easily thrown into a panic which disorganizes their thinking and makes them ridiculous when under the cross fire of examination or in a crisis. School-boys will not assert themselves and are often adjudged stupid when in reality they have done better daily work while plodding along than their more vocal fellows. Women are especially shy and in primitive villages will run from a stranger.

The generations through which they have been

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The generations through which they have been 56
exploited by their more powerful neighbours have left a 181
stamp upon them and even educated men and women 155
often allow themselves to be outdone in office and shop simply because they dislike to evoke contention. Often the faithful work of an individual does not bring the proper credit to the one earning it, for another steps in and takes advantage of his reticence to claim honour which he does not deserve.

In the old days retaliation for the exploitation they 186
underwent at the hands of the Burmans would be taken by their striking back whenever they saw an opportunity. Small parties of Burmans who were caught in the Karen hills seldom returned alive. It was not because the Karens were worse than others or more given to atrocities, but simply that to them it was a way of getting what they thought was justice.

In their original condition they not only made forays 628
against other races but were continually at feuds among themselves. The theft of a buffalo or a bronze drum, or the kidnapping of a child or a slave, was occasion for a foray. These usually went on and continued from bad to worse until villages were destroyed and many lives were lost. There were no other courts of justice.

The Karens felt the lack of the Book, as they called 177
the Bible,—a need that contributed to what we now would 181
call an inferiority complex. But like all people, either individuals or nations, that have an inferiority complex they were ready and waiting to be led out into greater freedom. They hailed the coming of the American Baptist missionaries as those who could help them to find themselves, to get their rights and to free themselves from the thraldoms into which they were conscious that they had

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177 fallen. They told a story to illustrate this, for they spoke
181 in parables in order to explain many of the situations in which they found themselves.

538 They said they were like a family which built their little hut for a shelter while cultivating a hillside. There the children and the old sow and her piglets were left while the parents went off over the hillside to cut the jungle and make their clearing. One day a tiger came in and grabbed the sow and carried her off, much to the distress of the children. When the parents returned in the evening they were told what had happened and the father determined to put the children and piglets up on a high bamboo platform out of reach of the tiger before they went to their work the next morning.

The tiger returned and finding no prey within reach set up a howl as he vainly tried to jump to the platform. The children stood it as long as they could and then threw down a pig to appease the beast. This they did at intervals while all the time they were longing to hear the twang of the father's bowstring that would send an arrow quivering through the heart of the tiger. This, the Karens said, represented their condition as they waited for the "white brother" to come and free them from the slavery to evil spirits and give them the Book that would enable them to hold up their heads among the peoples of Burma.

177 Under the impulse of Christianity the desire for
181 education was strong from the beginning of the contact
797 of the Karens with the Westerners. They wanted to read their own Book and to have a broader education. They demanded to be taught the English language. The early missionaries desired only to train them for a more abundant life in their own country and for a time refused to teach

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
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177 them a language that might denationalize them. But
181 when they sought outside teachers who would instruct
797 them in English, the missionaries agreed to carry on schools in that language, and there grew up the Anglo-Vernacular system (English combined with the vernaculars, Burmese and Karen) that reached up to the
153 University with its degrees. Karen students usually are
871 slower to grasp new ideas than Burmans, but they often retain them better and have been, in proportion to their numbers, just as good students as any other race in the country. When they get over their reticence and fears they seem to be able to succeed in any endeavour for which they have the aptitude.

186 The Karens are often accused of being clannish. They
582 are, but it is their natural self-interest which leads them to cling to each other for protection from their more powerful neighbours. For the same reason they condemn marriage outside the tribe.

181 Although physically the Karen seems to an outsider
152 closely to resemble the Burman, he has many very
101 different racial characteristics which make it difficult for the two peoples to understand each other. The Burman is much like his own national emblem, the peacock, given to show and to a great appreciation of fine feathers. He likes to do things quickly and not too thoroughly. He watches those whom he desires to please and caters to their tastes. He uses many honorifics and is diplomatic in his language and manner. He often wears a silk *longyi* of dainty colours over a body that is rough and unwashed.

The Karen wears his dirty clothes over his unwashed person and feels that the two go together. He cares nothing for personal appearance. He is abrupt in his

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
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181 152 fol language and not much given to servility. Direct in his speech and with his mind easily upset by panic and timidity, he is often what we would call impolite and very undiplomatic. He makes no effort to show himself to his best advantage but has a sort of "take it or leave it" attitude that often gets him into trouble. This makes him all the more desirous of shunning those with whom he feels that he cannot compete. This is another reason why he sought the jungles and the hills.

153 529 Many early writers on the Karens have described them as devoid of humour. This can easily be explained when one understands the fears with which they surrounded everything. They were struck with terror by Government officers and other aggressive Europeans, with their strange appearance and ways. They did not dare to laugh for they did not understand what was supposed to be a joke. Therefore they preserved poker faces and seemed dumb and dead. The writer has spent many hours with them when the flow of humour and the joyous laughter were as spontaneous and happy as among any people he was ever with. Stories, practical jokes, wise-cracks came as quickly and merrily as in any language. But a man must have their confidence and know their language if he would enjoy himself among them.

There is a naivety among the Karens that is often very refreshing. They do not seem to be able to plot involved schemes for deceiving their neighbours. When they do attempt such things their simple plots usually fail. There is a simplicity among them that makes one feel a genuine friendliness when with them. One is usually safe in leaving one's luggage in their houses. Pedlars most often sleep at Karen houses when they can, for they

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER IV

MENTAL AND MORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KAREN

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The Karen draws the blinds over the windows of his heart and leaves one to wonder what goes on within. I once asked an educated Karen what he thought was the chief characteristic of his race, and he immediately replied that they are a people who can be afraid. Centuries of subjugation and oppression have filled them with fear. During the protracted period of their tribulations, to be caught by a Burman was to be stripped of everything, even of one's clothing, and to be beaten into the bargain. Where only a few families lived on the plains, the women with child dared not undergo confinement in their houses, lest they could not escape from a sudden attack by their oppressors. Karen cartmen still drive around a village rather than through it, although they know there is little danger of having dogs set on them, as there used to be. Not only does the Karen fear his fellow-men, but he is also terrified by the strange and weird beings, demons and ghosts, with which his imagination and credulity people the world. Should he, even by chance, offend any of these—and it is easily done he thinks—he must live in dread of their vengeance. His religion is one of fear, precaution, and propitiatory sacrifice. The trepidations of the past have been perpetuated through generations and, though education has stifled them in a measure, they still crop out on occasion even in the most advanced members of the race.

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The Karen is led into all sorts of difficulties by his timidity. He is apprehensive and desirous of avoiding trouble with officers or others. When brought into court to answer questions, often this fear will lead him to deny any knowledge of the facts, instead of relating what he has seen; or he may acknowledge the opposite of what he wants to prove. Not long ago I heard of a man who had what seemed to be a good case, but on the witness-stand he swore to the opposite of what he had told previously. When asked why he did so, he replied that he was so scared that he did not know what he was saying. In thus yielding to his timidity the Karen often in-

25: Ferrars E-5 (ca. 1890) 1901 APl Burma
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331. KAREN VILLAGE.

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in small numbers, chiefly as pilgrims to the Buddhist shrines, of which the chief is the Shwe Dagôn, in Rangoon (p. 188).

The Karéns are the most important hill-race of the country, and best exemplify the mode of life of the quasi-aboriginal tribes, whom Burmans, Taláings, and Shans have kept out of the plain-land. The "white Karéns," Sghaw (*Sgkrɔaw*) and Pwo, occupy the mountains between Burma and Siam. They have colonies in mountains far to the east and west, and have also spread into the plains adjoining. They call themselves *Baganyéw* (*Bgkrɔaganyéw*), and call the Burmans *Bayéw*. The Burmans call them *Kayín*, and familiarly *Tha-ngè-dyín*—play-mate, in much the same way as we say "Jack Burman" and "John Chinaman." The Karéns get their living by making hill-forest clearings (*taungya*), on which they raise one crop, and remove to fresh sites every season.

K 177

On the fringe of the mountain tracts the Karéns are more or less Burmanized, and practise Buddhism, being attracted by the prestige of the religion, with its great festivals in which everyone is free to share,—especially now that they can mingle in the towns without fear of their quondam oppressors. The barbarous *tɔgwin*, which the Burmans themselves are beginning to disuse, is one of the first marks of the contact of the Karén with the dominant race. The Karéns settled in the lowlands are known as Taláing-Kayín, and Bamá-Kayín. The men know Burmese, and dress like Burmans.

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The Karén is noted for truthfulness and chastity. The former characteristic is probably to be accounted for by absence of coercive *régime*, their society being, as Macpherson says of the Khonds, pervaded by

332. KAREN MOTHER AND BABE.

25: Ferrars E-5 (ca. 1890) 1901 APl Burma
Karen AP7

333. KARENS BRINGING ELEPHANTS TO MARKET.

"a spirit of equality, and governed by the moral influence of its natural heads alone." (Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, Vol. I., p. 407.) The chief of these elders is called *Sawkè*; he gives his name to the village. The faults of the Karéns are their dirt, their addiction to drink, and a degree of superstition so extreme that a motherless infant is refused adoption for fear of turning the wrath of a vengeful demon upon the foster-mother. In epidemics of cholera and small-pox the Karéns abandon their villages in panic fear. The Karéns are shorter but of stouter build than the Burmans and Talaings, and of much fairer complexion. But their name of "white" Karén is derived from their clothing. Very characteristic is their short upper arm. Young people of splendid physique may be seen; but the conditions of life are so hard, and malaria is so prevalent in the forests, that the population remains stationary—by the census of 1891, 633,600. The toilsome Karén finds lightness of heart in the liquor he brews, a remarkable contrast to the vivacious and abstinent Burman. The contrast is borne out in the dreary wail of the Karén music and the bright and exuberant cadences of the Burmese. Karén children grow independent very young (No. 355), and begin their heavy outdoor labour soon. Early physical exertion possibly accounts for the second moral quality noted above. The hill-cultivation is greatly at the mercy of the seasons, from burning-time in April to harvest in October. The hardship is aggravated by a superstition of divination-bones (*Kyeyyo*) which often tabooes the most eligible sites. Scarcely have the crops been garnered than the clearing of a fresh site for the village begins.

334. KARENS GOING OUT TO WORK.